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WELCOME TO WOLLONGONG COMMUNITY ACTION PROJECT¹

Peter Kell, Virginie Schmelitschek, Anne Maree Smith and Gillian Vogl

ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a community action project that was developed by a community committee to assist international students to feel more welcome in Wollongong. Research with international students carried out since 2005 by Peter Kell and Gillian Vogl found that international students who were well connected to their communities experienced greater well being and performed better academically. In 2006 a community working group was formed comprising staff and students from different sectors at the University of Wollongong; representatives from Wollongong City Council; the local business chamber; local businesses, Illawarra Ethnic Communities Council and Illawarra TAFE. The Welcome to Wollongong (W2W) Community Group worked together to put in place a community website for international students and also to co-ordinate a civic reception and mini festival to welcome new international students to Wollongong. This was held in February 2008 and was funded by an IMB community foundation grant. This paper provides an evaluation of this project and discusses a new type of framework that the authors believe should underpin the international student experience. This framework proposes a wellness and security paradigm in managing international student mobility.

INTRODUCTION

The majority of research conducted on the experience of international students suggests both that international students want, and expect to form, friendships with local students' and that this interaction is important for international students social, psychological and academic well being.

¹ The authors would like to thank all the organisations involved in the Welcome to Wollongong Community Action project. These included: Staff and students from the University of Wollongong; Wollongong City Council, Illawarra Ethnic Communities Council; Illawarra Business Chamber; Wollongong Central, GPT; Crown Street Mall; Illawarra TAFE; Dion's bus Service; Momentum and the Illawarra Committee for International students. We would also like to thank the IMB Community Foundation who funded this project.

‘Welcome to Wollongong’ was a community initiative with the objective of promoting better links between international students and the community and was aimed at recognising the contribution of international students in the city of Wollongong and the Illawarra.

International students contribute significantly towards their host countries in a number of important ways. Students contributed \$9billion to the Australian economy in 2004-05 and now surpass wheat, wool and beef in export earnings. International student spending on goods and services in Australia in 2005 was \$5.3 billion (ABS). In addition, to the very significant economic contribution international students bring to Australia they also bring great cultural richness to the university and surrounding region. Their presence also enables opportunities for the development of cross-cultural skills and the strengthening and promotion of global exchanges, networks and relationships in business, politics and other aspects of everyday life.

The funding of Welcome to Wollongong was from an IMB Community Foundation Grant of \$20,000. Welcome to Wollongong consisted of a civic welcome and a festival held on 29th February 2008 in Crown Street Mall in the City of Wollongong. In addition, the grant funded the development of a website with general information for international students (including those at TAFE and schools) given from a student perspective. The site is <http://www.w2w.uow.edu.au>

This paper documents both this project and describes the rationale for the development of this project. This paper also provides an evaluation of this project and discusses the framework and practice that the authors believe should underlie the ‘integration’ and interaction between international students and their host communities.

BACKGROUND

The other thing that I have found hard is that I had this idea before moving to Australia, because Australia is quite multicultural country, I didn't think that I was going to face lots of prejudice but I do and still I feel that it is strong, still lots of prejudice going on and they never accept you, they always look at you as non Australian, in uni you can say in some areas, not always, they are a bit better but if you want to work here, it gets tough, if you want to be a part of the community it gets more tough. I found it quite hard to get acceptance from students and also some lecturers. I can see clearly sometimes that it is not for any other reason except that I am not Australian (Iranian student).

While marketing messages used to sell Australia as a study destination to Asia, promote Australia as a friendly, multicultural country that is free from racism and violence (Sidhu 2005), research carried out on international students suggests that this is not always the case (Deumert 2006 et al., Kell et al 2006, Kell and Vogl 2007a, 2007b, 2007c, 2008, forthcoming, Novera 2004 and Robertson et al 2000). Students talk of instances of discrimination and racism, in addition to experiences where they had been placed in physical danger and subsequently at psychological risk due to the ensuing trauma from their experiences. A student interviewed by Kell and Vogl stated that:

I expected Wollongong to be safe but actually I was robbed two times by teenagers and some of my friends also told me that teenagers threw tomatoes at them, that was terrible, I think about, they used a knife and asked me for money two time, I report to the security office but I don't think it worked.

Students feel discriminated against in finding places to live and finding employment. They experience discrimination and are subject to exploitation once they are employed. Students speak of feelings of loneliness and disorientation and difficulties in forming bonds with local students and people in the broader community. Feelings of loneliness and disorientation are often compounded by financial difficulties and poverty (Kell et al 2006, Kell and Vogl 2007a, 2007b, 2007c, forthcoming).

Dominant discourses in the media about international students often portray host communities as vulnerable and associate international students with anxieties about migration, competition for student places and local jobs, overpopulation and overcrowding and a perceived failure to 'assimilate'. Yet as the above interview excerpts suggest, it is in reality, international students who are at risk. In an unfamiliar environment there is a potential for injury and illness through misadventure as well as a vulnerability to mental health issues caused by a sense of alienation and anomie which has become a common occurrence for many international students (Kell & Vogl 2005, 2006 & 2007b).

The relationship that international students establish with members of the community is very significant (Ward 2006). Ferris (2001) claims that the way that various community representatives and residents respond to newcomers will impact on the extent to which these newcomers are able to participate as full members of their host communities rather than remaining on the periphery. A

focus on building nurturing and welcoming communities is imperative in providing an inclusive environment in which all members are able to fully engage which is important for the health and wellbeing of international students. However, studies with international students show that most students access support from within their educational institutions and many only have very superficial contact with the broader community (Ward 2006).

The purpose of the Welcome to Wollongong Community Action Project was to facilitate the inclusion of international students into their host community. Racism towards international students has increased both on and off campus in the Illawarra region since the terrorist attack on New York in 2001.

The aim of the Welcome to Wollongong Community Action Project was to raise the profile within the broader community of the issues which international students face and also the dimensions of the economic and cultural contribution that they make toward their host communities while they live and study in Australia.

THE WELCOME TO WOLLONGONG COMMUNITY WORKING GROUP

The success of the Welcome to Wollongong Pilot initiative was largely due to a committed and cohesive community working group and included academic and general staff from the University; Wollongong City Council staff; international and domestic students; representatives from the undergraduate and postgraduate student union; TAFE staff; members of the business community and community workers; who worked on this project throughout 2007 and 2008. The working group met once a month during the duration of this project at Wollongong City Council and was also sub divided into a number of sub committees who met regularly. International students played a very integral and active role in the Welcome to Wollongong committee and all of the subcommittees.

The Community working group decided collaboratively on what strategies should be put in place to achieve the project aims. A civic reception, international student mini-festival and a community website for international students were decided upon as strategies to make Wollongong more welcoming for international students and make the community more aware of the contribution of international students. An events manager who had years of experience and expertise in

organising festivals and who was a member of one of the community organisations and the community working group was employed to oversee the festival component of the Welcome to Wollongong project.

THE W2W PROJECT

The Welcome to Wollongong project (W2W) mixed elements of formality, the arts, pageantry and new technologies of the web in developing a community based research project. The project had a strong engagement and participation from the community. Of particular importance was the agency and involvement of international students, along with others in the community.

The rationale behind the civic reception was to provide a symbolic welcome to Wollongong. In the last few years, a number of universities have joined with their local councils to provide civic receptions to welcome international students. It was decided that the civic reception would be held on a stage in the main shopping strip rather than in an indoor hall, so that it would take place amongst everyday community members and hopefully raise community awareness of the number of international students studying in Wollongong and also make the community aware that international students were being officially welcomed to the area. The mini festival was decided upon to provide a celebration to welcome international students to Wollongong and also to entice local students and community members to come along.

The mini festival involved a number of local artists including Arabic “belly” dancers, a Chinese lion dance and a multicultural youth rap group. The main performer was a former ‘Australian Idol contestant’. The local radio announcer and an international student were the MC’s for the day. Community groups and business group conducted information stalls on the day and included legal aid, health advice and well as student clubs and societies.

The date and day of the week of the civic reception and mini festival were chosen to coincide with the Friday markets in the mall. This was done as it was thought that the markets would enhance the festive atmosphere on the day and ensure that a number of community residents would be in the mall when the Welcome to Wollongong activities were conducted on the day.

Part of the aim of the project was to raise community and business awareness of the economic contribution international students make to the area. This was done through visits to the Economic development manager of Wollongong City Council, visits to the manager of Illawarra Regional development board, visits and correspondence with small business owners, attendance at business network meetings and through the media. A number of international students have been employed on the project and more have attended the meetings voluntarily and therefore the whole process of meeting together as a working group has created greater social interaction between these international students and members of the broader community.

THE WEBSITE

A Welcome to Wollongong website www.w2w.uow.edu.au was also developed. The material for the website was compiled and collated by one of the authors of this paper in consultation with students. An email was sent out to the international student email list asking students about what information they would like to see on the website. The intention was to develop a website where "real" issues for students were profiled rather than the usual public relations information presented on university sites. Community representatives, business people and university staff also contacted the website team with information that they wanted up on the website. An international student was employed as the website manager and he with the help of the University IT programmers and some volunteer international students put the information up on the website. International students also sent in student stories. The website has been very successful and between January and May had 6,416 visits.

EVALUATION TOOLS

A number of methods were used to evaluate the Welcome to Wollongong project:

1. Focus groups and interviews were conducted with 30 international students prior to and after the W2W festival.
2. Focus group and interviews were conducted with domestic students and community representatives.

3. W2W volunteers handed out two separate surveys on the day of the civic reception and mini festival. One was for community residents and the other for international students. 24 surveys were completed by community residents and 69 were completed by international students.
4. A video of the festival was recorded which included interviews with community members, academics and students.
5. An evaluation meeting took place a week after the mini festival and members were asked to provide their feedback about the mini festival and civic reception and the future of the W2W project. Members also informed the group of informal feedback that they had received from other community members, staff and students.
6. A planning day was held to discuss international student issues in the university and also to discuss how to proceed with the Welcome to Wollongong project.
7. An evaluation report was written as part of one of the requirements from the funding body.

Due to the word limit on this paper, not all of these findings can be discussed, however, some of the more significant findings are discussed below.

EVALUATION

Essentially, the Welcome to Wollongong pilot project was successful in the achievement of its aims. The proposed events were conducted and implemented according to the original proposal and there was strong support and involvement for the three components of the project within the university and among representative from business and community organisations. The success of this project can be partly evidenced by the fact that the university has committed to provide part of the funding so that the project can continue.

The most significant achievement of the project was the development of the community working group. The diversity of the group meant that we were able to focus on the needs of

international students from a range of perspectives and the group if nurtured has the potential to become an invaluable resource in helping to provide strategies for international students. There is the potential for the group to develop into an even more strongly cohesive group in the future and for it to include additional members.

Essentially, the group ran smoothly and feedback from members is that they would like to continue to be part of the W2W group in the future. Overall, experiences of being part of the group were positive. There were minor tensions and disagreements over a few issues but these were resolved. The committee structure operated as a place where international students could demonstrate their effectiveness as productive members of the Australian community.

The days of the civic reception and festival seemed to be a great success with over 500 people attending. Students provided positive feedback about the W2W website and the civic reception and festival. Sixty nine international students from 18 countries filled out the surveys on the day of the Welcome to Wollongong festival. The largest group of international students represented in the surveys were Chinese students (29) and the second largest were students from Saudi Arabia (18). The majority of students were in age group between 20 and 24 with 45 of the student being male and 24 female. The majority of students had chosen to come to Australia because they perceived it to be a multicultural country and chose Wollongong because of the “quality of the institution”. Some of the difficulties/issues which students mentioned were as follows:

It is very hard for me to mix with Australians

Problems with finding places to rent especially for international students

No prayer space in the mall

Out of the 63 international students who answered the question as to whether or not the mini festival had made them feel more welcome, 60 agreed that it had. The majority of students cited the friendliness of the festival as being the main reason that is made them feel more welcome. Other reasons which student provided were that:

The festival is for welcoming international students, make me feel respected

I just feel it

I have come here for one year, last year we don't have this activity, I think it is good to make the newcomer get to know the area here, make them feel comfortable, yeah it is good, also to know that the council here is very concerned about our international students.

It made me feel comfortable.

Excellent, the first but we wish not to be the last.

Made me feel more at home

Mayor, the Mayor made me feel welcome

Out of the 24 community members who filled out the survey, 18 felt that the community should be more responsible for making international students feel more welcome in the area.

In the focus group that was organised after the festival, one of the participants suggested that more information needed to be provided prior to the festival about the significance of the welcoming committee. One of the students stated that as international students had only been in the country for a week, many of the students may not have been aware of who the Mayor or the Vice Chancellor were.

While the day appeared to be a success in that nearly all the students surveyed said that it had made them feel more welcome, in the evaluation and planning meetings, the extent to which the project had achieved its greater aims was questioned. As a result of having the festival on the same day as the markets this meant that there were members of the community present. Most of the community members who filled out surveys stated that they were at the festival just because they happened to be in the mall that day. Some students and staff felt that further strategies need to be developed to involve community residents and business owners in the larger project and on the day itself. One of the main issues that arose from the evaluation was the need for more community involvement. Students didn't really feel like they had learnt more about the community or that the community had learnt more about them.

One of the participants who attended the festival, who has expertise in race and ethnic studies, was concerned that a 'traditional Hindu dance' that was performed on the stage may have been offensive to students from Islamic backgrounds. However, from the survey results and discussion with students from Islamic background who attended the festival this did not appear to be the case.

She also insinuated that the festival was superficial and suggested it was "tacky". There is always the danger of superficial responses to multiculturalism which reaffirm stereotypes. However, the Welcome to Wollongong program represents an initiative from students and a genuine attempt to engage meaningfully with the community. As a result of the development of the festival, dialogue was created between the University, the community and business groups. Many international students also played an extremely pro active role in helping organise the festival and obtained 'local' experience from being involved in the project. Many students have become more involved in community activities and with community organisations as a result of their involvement W2W project. Stronger networks have been created between community and business groups and international students.

Also, the strategies which would be put in place to welcome international students, such as, the festival were decided upon collaboratively by the group and thus it became a community owned project rather than a university dominated one. However, having said this, the overwhelming sense that students didn't really feel like they had learnt more about the community or that the community had become more educated about them, means that successive events would have to involve more of an educational component to accompany any sort of celebration.

This was a pilot project and some of the suggested changes to improve the success of this project which came as a result of the evaluation meeting and planning day were as follows:

1. More information needs to be provided to international students about the significance of the civic reception and of the significance of the official party who welcomed them to Wollongong.

2. The project needs to work on strengthening its connections with community residents, businesses and community representatives in the area.
3. The findings from the surveys suggest that the venue was seen as an excellent choice; however, further work needs to be done to involve local business/shops in the festival.
4. An education project about issues associated with global student mobility and international students needs to be included in any future events.
5. While members of the group attended business network meetings and visited businesses in the area, this needs to be done more rigorously, in order to make parts of the project sustainable through business funding.

CONCLUSION

Research and the evaluation of this project suggest that there is an impression that education providers see the presence of international students as a “market” and as “tradable goods”. Students feel that although they pay unreasonably high fees by world standards, their presence is often seen as periphery and their special needs are not considered to be part of the “core business” of the University. Students expressed resentment toward the education providers and the city of Wollongong for what they saw as the differential treatment of students around social interaction, entertainment, accommodation, counselling, advice, transport, university services and access to employment opportunities. Expectations are often not being met adequately and this often reflects badly on the region and providers.

While the Welcome to Wollongong project helped to make some international students feel welcome in the area; racism, discrimination, isolation, loneliness and poverty continue to characterise the lives of many international students. The university and TAFE needs to be aware that international students are a core part of their business and extensive resources need to be put into nurturing these students for both economic and ethical reasons.

The authors propose that a “wellness paradigm” needs to be adopted as the framework for relating to the needs of international students which recognises the dimensions of risk associated with being an international student and realigns its services to reduce the risks

associated with the quality of student life and looks at reducing cultural alienation, loneliness and depression.

This also involves building language proficiency and establishing affiliations and bonds in the community and across host institutions. Enhancing support services to reduce students' exposure to high-risk environments is also recommended in areas such as housing, employment and better personal security.

International students bring added value to the university and the surrounding region and while the W2W project raised awareness of this fact through visits to business groups and through media coverage, the contribution international students make needs to be highlighted even more so. A better engagement between the community and business with international students could lead to a greater understanding among community members of the international community in general and if students go back to their countries with good stories, they are likely to promote Wollongong, which could potentially create opportunities for Wollongong with regards to international interests.

Welcome to Wollongong was a good illustration of how students are capable of mobilising in a collaborative manner and working with others for general improvement for the collective student body. This project involved a core group of students with some coming from Asian nations who were active and engaged in contributing to a positive and creative student experience. Their contribution to this project provides compelling evidence that refutes the stereotypes of students as passive subjects who lack commitment to broader social goals. On the contrary international students demonstrate a continuous generosity that showed a commitment to contributing towards a better and more harmonious interaction between students and the community.

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